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ABSTRACT

This article on what principals should know about reading addresses the issue of how to prepare students to become competent lifelong readers. It lays the foundation for bringing about high gains in reading motivation and achievement, and presents five basic premises and sets of recommendations for each premise. The premises are: (1) children learn from modeling; (2) it is natural for children to enjoy reading and to be motivated to read; (3) learning to read should be easy and fun; (4) good readers spend time practicing reading; and (5) students need to be stretched with high-level reading materials. (RS)

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"How do principals and teachers do both: raise test scores and nurture in children a love of reading?"

What Every Principal Should Know about Teaching Reading

by

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We want our children to become competent lifelong readers. To do this, they must learn to read well, enjoy reading and read a lot. At the same time, we demand that students demonstrate reading competence on an ever-growing array of tests. So how do principals and teachers do both: raise test scores ***and*** nurture a love of reading in children?

Unfortunately, educators face enormous obstacles on the path toward these dual objectives. Data reported in 1992 by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for grades 4, 8, and 12 show that:

- U.S. students read very little, either in or outside of school;
- An overwhelming emphasis is placed on low-level reading workbook activities;
- Students have "difficulty in constructing thoughtful responses" when they read;
- Library use decreases throughout the school;
- About 20% of American students report reading for fun only yearly or never.

Those ominous trends threaten to defeat our best efforts at both raising tests scores and nurturing a love of reading in children. In a six-part series in this publication, we will provide principals and teachers with practical, action-oriented ideas that can help youngsters to become competent, motivated readers. This first article will lay the foundation for bringing about high gains in reading motivation and achievement. We present five basic premises and sets of recommendations for each premise. Future articles will discuss: whole language versus phonics; raising reading scores on the TAAS; capitalizing on learning styles for high reading gains (Carbo, Dunn and Dunn, 1991); key strategies from model reading styles programs; and techniques for evaluating reading programs.

Premise #1: Children learn from modeling. Adults and older students need to show youngsters that they value and enjoy reading.

Just as young people learn language by imitation, they learn to value and enjoy reading by observing role models. A principal with whom we work spends every spare moment of her time in classrooms, reading her favorite books to students. In her school, the students

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Marie Carbo is founder and executive director of the National Reading Styles Institute (NRSI) in Syosset, NY. Dr. Carbo originated the concept of "reading styles."

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"Just as young people learn language by imitation, they learn to value and enjoy reading by observing role models."

have begun to check more and more books out of the library and read them avidly.

That principal's message to her students is strong and positive: Reading is fun! I loved it when I was your age, and I want you to enjoy it as much as I did. Clearly, here is a role model that can provoke a heightened interest in lifelong reading. The enthusiasm, interest and delight we exhibit when we read to children are contagious.

One important point: The recommendations that accompany every premise in this article are intended for both teachers and principals (and parents, too!). All of these suggestions are being used in many classrooms with which we have worked. Helping children succeed as readers is a team effort.

Recommendations for Modeling

- Read aloud to young people, at least 15 minutes daily.
- For emerging readers, read large charts and books while pointing to the words.
- For non-fluent readers, read aloud a short passage a few times while the children follow along in their books until they can read the passage independently.
- Provide books on tape that allow students to listen and follow along. Record both textbooks and stories. Students need to hear and see the words repeatedly. (Carbo, 1989)

Premise #2: It's natural for children to enjoy reading and to be motivated to read.

The principal we previously mentioned wisely tapped into children's natural curiosity and motivation for reading. The simple act of reading aloud something we enjoy has always been one of the most powerful ways to interest children in reading.

It's the job of schools to make reading entertaining and motivating—to bring out the children's natural interests and curiosity and to encourage new interests. Engaging a child's natural motivation to read increases reading enjoyment and places him or her on the path to becoming a lifelong reader. Highly motivated students become more responsible about reading and are more likely to practice reading regularly.

Recommendations for Motivating Students

- Have a variety of people read to students often (teachers, authors, the principal, parents and older students).
- Provide a wide choice of reading materials in every classroom based on students' interests.
- Form book clubs that meet regularly. Allow students to create bulletin boards that reflect their reading interests.
- Encourage students to discuss their favorite books, characters and events.

Premise #3: Learning to read should be easy and fun.

Modeling for students (Premise #1) and motivating them to read

"Engaging a child's natural motivation to read increases reading enjoyment and places him or her on the path to becoming a lifelong reader."

(Premise #2) are the first steps toward literacy. So far, so good. Some children will become fluent readers from the recommendations listed above.

What about those youngsters who don't become fluent readers quickly? For them, there is a danger that reading may become a struggle. When the process of learning to read becomes laborious and even embarrassing, then the chances are high that the child will dislike and avoid reading. And we certainly don't want children to be turned off to reading. What do we do?

Our aim should be to help all children feel comfortable and relaxed when they are learning to read, to avoid creating any sense of failure, and to provide the amount and kind of practice needed to move kids forward. Decreasing stress makes kids more receptive and open to learning; they learn easier and faster. Here are six initial strategies that can help:

- Provide cozy reading areas with soft furniture, rugs, pillows. Help students to associate reading with pleasure.
- Provide time for students to read with friends.
- Use phonics sparingly, especially if a student is not auditory.
- Allow students to practice passages before reading in a group.
- Increase reading fluency with specially recorded passages. Record high interest stories using a slightly slower-than-usual pace. Place a short passage on a tape side (about two minutes). Have emerging readers listen to the tape and follow along a few times before reading the passage aloud.
- Accommodate students' reading styles by allowing them choices of how they will demonstrate what they have read, such as through pantomime, discussion, drawing or writing.

Premise #4. Good readers spend time practicing reading.

Let's assume that we have motivated children to read. They have heard many excellent and inspiring reading models, and we have made the process of learning to read easy and fun. What's the next step?

Practice, practice, practice. Good readers spend a lot of time reading. Reading is a skill that can bring fun, excitement, and wonder into a child's life. Yet, most American children spend very little time reading anything at all. If we have succeeded with the initial steps suggested above, then children are likely to want to practice reading. Practice helps to improve reading comprehension and vocabulary; practice also helps to raise test scores. To encourage students to read, we need to provide both high-interest reading materials and the time to read them.

"When the process of learning to read becomes laborious and even embarrassing, then the chances are high that the child will dislike and avoid reading."

Recommendations for Facilitating Reading Practice

- Encourage children to take books to read home.
- Set aside specific, uninterrupted reading periods during the school day.
- Sell affordable books.
- Sponsor book exchanges that allow children to trade books.
- Deemphasize workbook activities. Children should spend most of their reading time reading, being read to, discussing what they have read, and writing about what they have read.
- Have taped books available for those who are not yet independent readers.

Premise #5. Students need to be stretched with high-level reading materials.

All our recommendations thus far are designed to put children on the path to becoming good readers. If we do not expose our youngsters to high-level materials, however, it's likely that they'll never be able to read or understand them. This stretching process needs to be done so that children are challenged, but not defeated.

Stretching occurs rarely in most compensatory or remedial programs. Children in Title I programs generally spend inordinate amounts of time alone at their desks working on low-level skill-and-drill activities. Instead, they would "benefit greatly from increased expectations and

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"We need to stretch children so that they are challenged, but not defeated."

demands," according to a report by Anderson and Pellicer that evaluated U.S. programs designed to improve the achievement of economically disadvantaged and educationally deficient students (Anderson and Pellicer, 1990). We spend billions of dollars each year on Title I programs, and yet youngsters in these programs do not do well in reading, often spending their entire school career in remedial classes.

Recommendations for Stretching Readers

- Read aloud challenging materials often and ask thought-provoking questions.
- Provide real situations that challenge children's thinking, such as running a toy sale or planning a trip.
- Ask high-level questions, such as predicting or interpreting the behavior of characters in a story.
- Model high-level thinking by actually thinking aloud about questions relating to something that has been read.
- Have students design their own high-level questions.

After all of these premises and recommendations, what do good reading programs actually look like? As described by NAEP, reading programs that provide optimum learning conditions for emerging readers have five characteristics in common; these characteristics fit perfectly with the kinds of strategies we've outlined in this first article. They are:

1. Students do large amounts of reading both in and outside of school; they read a great variety of materials (novels, poems, and stories).
2. Workbook activities are deemphasized.
3. Discussions of reading materials emphasize high-level thinking.
4. Reading and writing are connected.
5. Literacy is supported in the home.

The next article in this series will tackle the controversy of whole language versus phonics. We will emphasize the dangers of becoming caught in the pendulum swings of the debate between these two camps in the field of reading. We will focus on the child instead of on any single method, discussing the utility and the weaknesses of both approaches—how to plug the holes, combine them and make them stronger instructionally.

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